

Overview of President Kennedy, the Cold War, and Cuba

The late 1950s were marked by a series of Cold War crises that strained superpower relations. In 1956 the Soviets brutally repressed a democratic uprising in Hungary. The United States did nothing for fear of starting World War III. A year later, the Soviets tested the first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching U.S. soil. In 1958 an American U-2 spy plane was shot down while taking photographs of Soviet military installations. And in 1960, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to start a war over control of the German city of Berlin. War was averted, but the Soviets built the Berlin Wall—a wall of barbed wire and concrete—to divide democratic West Berlin from communist East Berlin.

By 1961 Cold War tensions were perhaps most serious in the island nation of Cuba, south of Florida in the Caribbean Sea. Fidel Castro and his Communist revolutionary followers had overthrown a corrupt dictator and risen to power in Cuba on New Year's Day, 1959. Weeks later, Castro suspended most civil rights, established military rule across the island, and embraced the Soviet Union and Communist China as allies. Thousands of Cubans felt betrayed by Castro and fled to the United States.

When President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, he made it clear that he would not back down before the Soviet threat. In his inaugural address, Kennedy said the United States would “bear any burden” and “pay any price” for the cause of freedom worldwide. He vowed to take the lead in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, continuing the U.S. foreign policy, dominant since World War II, of containing Soviet communism around the globe.

During his first week in office, Kennedy learned of a plan to overthrow Castro by sponsoring an invasion by Cuban exiles at a site called the Bay of Pigs. This plan had been conceived by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the last months of the term of Kennedy's predecessor, Eisenhower. Kennedy's key advisers said the CIA plan would work and should go forward. Somewhat reluctantly, Kennedy finally agreed.

The Bay of Pigs operation was a disaster. Few of the Cuban exiles participating in the invasion had any significant military training, and their equipment consisted of World War II-era U.S. military castoffs. Most significantly, the CIA had told the exiles that they would have the support of U.S. troops. Kennedy, however, had pledged that he would not directly involve U.S. forces. The CIA believed that Kennedy would change his mind when American prestige was at stake, but the president did not. Less than 72 hours after the exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs, Castro's soldiers, using Soviet-supplied tanks, guns, and ammunition, had completely defeated them. Embarrassed by the failure of the invasion, Kennedy quickly approved another plan—called Operation Mongoose—to use the CIA to disrupt the Cuban economy and possibly to assassinate Fidel Castro. The Soviets and the Cubans responded by planning a secret military buildup on the island. The stakes for Cuba in the Cold War rivalry were high, and in October 1962, the superpower competition erupted in what many experts call the most serious and dangerous crisis of the Cold War.

TOP SECRET BRIEFING A

To: President John F. Kennedy and advisors
From: The U.S. Intelligence Community
Re: Nuclear Missiles in Cuba, mid October 1962

Mr. President, on October 14, 1962, American U-2 spy planes photographed a missile launch pad under construction on the island of Cuba. This launch pad, when completed, would allow the firing of Soviet-supplied nuclear weapons with a range of 1,000 miles--enough to put the lives of 80 million Americans at risk should the missiles be fired at the United States.

After the Bay of Pigs invasion failed to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev pledged he would not put offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. It is now clear that Khrushchev was lying and cannot be trusted. The state of readiness of the launch pads indicates that the Soviets have been secretly shipping nuclear missiles for months. It appears they may be ready to fire very soon.

The missiles in Cuba are part of what appears to be a huge arms buildup to shore up Communist control of Cuba. We believe there are as many as 20,000 Soviet "technicians" in Cuba at this time. The Soviets may be armed with tactical--small battlefield--nuclear weapons undetectable from the air. In addition, the Soviets have installed a ring of SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) that are capable of shooting down any American aircraft the United States uses to maintain surveillance of the situation.

As you and your advisors are aware, Mr. President, the United States maintains clear superiority to the Soviets in the nuclear arms race. The number of ICBMs in U.S. arsenals is nearly double that of the Soviets. Also, U.S. nuclear missiles in Turkey provide a distinct advantage. Remember, too, that a U.S. Navy submarine armed with nuclear missiles is about to be placed in the Mediterranean Sea to provide quick-strike capabilities.

Why the Soviet premier has chosen this action at this time is not entirely clear--after all, there are already enough nuclear missiles in the Soviet Union itself to annihilate the United States. It appears that the Soviet premier may be attempting to gain an upper hand in the Cold War with one bold move.

Critical-Thinking Question A: You are a presidential advisor to Kennedy. You must decide whether the president should be concerned about Soviet missiles and launch pads in Cuba. What do you advise the president to do? Kennedy has asked you to brainstorm possible U.S. responses to the Soviet missile threat in Cuba. What will you include on your list?

TOP SECRET BRIEFING B

To: President John F. Kennedy and advisors
From: The U.S. Intelligence Community
Re: U.S. Response to missile buildup in Cuba

Since our last briefing, Mr. President, the Soviet buildup of missiles in Cuba has continued at a frantic pace.

The missile launch site at San Cristobal, near the capital city of Havana, will be operational in 10 days. When complete, the warning time for a missile attack against the United States will be cut from 15 minutes to between 2 and 3 minutes. U.S. cities from Washington, DC, to Kansas City are at risk. Furthermore, some of our intelligence suggests that the Soviets are installing longer-range nuclear missiles that could be ready by mid November. These missiles would leave only one major U.S. city outside their range: Seattle.

Mr. President, you asked us to compile a series of options for you and your advisors to consider, keeping in mind your general goals: getting the missiles out of Cuba, avoiding a nuclear exchange, preparing for Soviet moves elsewhere in the world (such as Berlin), and not losing face.

As we see it, the United States can respond in at least five ways to the Soviet construction of missile sites in Cuba:

1. Ignore the missiles.
2. Initiate a naval blockade of Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from bringing further supplies to the island.
3. Invade Cuba.
4. Launch a conventional airstrike against the missile sites.
5. Send an emissary to discuss the matter with Khrushchev.

Critical-Thinking Question B: You are a member of the Executive Committee, known as ExCom, a group of Kennedy's closest advisors gathered to help him work through this crisis. The president has asked you to assess these five possible responses. How would you prioritize these possible responses? What are the positive and negative aspects of each?

TOP SECRET BRIEFING C

To: ExCom members
From: President John F. Kennedy
Re: Our response and Soviet reactions

Since our last briefing by the U.S. intelligence community, you are well aware of the course of action that I have ordered: a naval blockade of the island of Cuba. I decided to blockade Cuba because I believe that a U.S. airstrike against Cuban missile sites might result in the death of Soviet soldiers in Cuba, and that loss would likely trigger World War III. As you know, however, the crisis with the Soviet Union over nuclear missiles in Cuba is far from over.

On Monday, October 22, I informed our citizens on television of my intent to begin a strict quarantine, or blockade, of all offensive military equipment being shipped to Cuba. I also stated that any missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, and would require our full retaliatory response.

On Tuesday, Khrushchev sent me a letter stating that the Soviet Union would not observe the blockade, which he called illegal. Later that day, U.S. ships stopped and boarded a Panamanian vessel full of Soviet goods that was headed to Cuba. As it contained no military material, it was allowed to proceed. On Wednesday, I learned that 25 Soviet merchant ships were steaming toward Cuba, accompanied by 6 Soviet submarines. Although these ships did eventually alter their course and remained outside the quarantine line, on Saturday morning one of the ships detached itself and began speeding toward Cuba in defiance of the blockade. More ominously, one of our U-2 spy planes was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet SAM missile early Saturday morning, and the American pilot was killed.

The military generals who form my Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended an immediate airstrike on the missile sites, an action that would, I believe, very likely push us over the brink and into nuclear war with the Soviet Union. However, if I maintain the blockade despite the criticism of the military, I want to know what you think I should do in several situations that could arise. What do you recommend I do if

1. The Soviets fire on American naval vessels enforcing the blockade?
2. The Soviets attempt to break the blockade?
3. The Soviets wait it out for weeks or months until the crisis subsides?
4. Cuban commanders launch one of the missiles already in Cuba toward the United States?

Critical-Thinking Question C: You are a member of ExCom. Respond to the four situations the president might face, keeping in mind his goals for the crisis as outlined in Top Secret Briefing C. Then offer your recommendation for what the president should do now.